

WHAT A MOTHER MUST BE

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This booklet will offer a means of self-examination for every mother in the light of two things. The first is the ideal of motherhood as human beings instinctively dream about it, or poets and songsters have glorified it, as many mothers have actually approached it in the rearing of their children. The second is the picture of the one perfect mother whom God gave to the world, who was both His own mother and destined to be the spiritual mother of all human beings.

The description of the ideal mother, as she was actualized in Mary Immaculate, may take the form of eight simple beatitudes of motherhood. A beatitude is a virtue whose practice brings blessing and happiness. Each of these represents something that God intended to be found in mothers, and for which He created a special kind of love in their hearts that makes its practice possible. Since all human beings are free, even those endowed like mothers with special gifts from God, it is possible for mothers to fail in one or many of these marks of the ideal mother. Only one mother has failed in nothing that she owed to her children. All other mothers are called upon by God to try ceaselessly to be imitators of her.

Here are the eight marks that form the beatitudes of a good mother.

1

She is the strength that provides for the weakness of her child.

When a child is born into the world, it remains for a long time helpless to feed itself, helpless to move itself from one place to another, helpless to do anything that is necessary for its welfare.

The mother's strength provides for all this weakness of her child. She feeds it at the proper times, at best from her own body; she carries it about so that it will get its first glimpses of the world in which it will have to live; she bathes it, dresses it, washes its clothes, watches lest danger or disease approach it, and with her own strength stands in the way of those dangers and diseases.

The strength with which a mother supplies for the weakness of her child is needed by the child for many years after it is able to supply for itself some of the physical things it needs. Her strength always gives a sense of security to a growing child; it firmly directs the child in the way it should go.

How perfectly Mary fulfills this beatitude in respect to all her children, of whatever age. All are making a journey through life that is intended by God to end in the home that is heaven. All are helpless to stay on the right path without the grace of God; Mary has the power to obtain for them the graces that they need and the love to dispense them when they are asked for in prayer. All are inclined to grow weak and falter in their service to God; weakness calls for the strength of a mother and God designed Mary to be the strength for her faltering children.

2

She is the guaranteed comfort for the pains and sorrows of her child.

In its first conscious experience of pain a child instinctively calls for its mother. The call never goes unheeded by a good mother. Sometimes the call is made in the depths of the night, when a child's pain is compounded by the terrors of darkness. In an instant the good mother is beside her child, with her hand on its brow, her love and sympathy bringing solace to the little one. She may not be able to stop the pain, but her very presence makes it easy for the child to bear.

This too goes on through the years of growth into adolescence. The hurts a child receives are not all physical. In its first brushes with the world every child is sometimes hurt by companions, schoolmates, brothers and sisters, and by afflictions that may be sent by God. Mothers are endowed with the power to take the sting out of all such hurts and to show their children how to turn them into good.

This is true in the perfect sense of Mary. No mother ever suffered in delivering a child as Mary suffered in delivering her divine Son to the cross and thus earning the title of Mother of all whose real life He is. The power to comfort others is proportionate to the suffering one has endured for them. Under that title Mary's power to comfort is all but limitless.

Throughout all of life—even into old age—there are sufferings to be borne by human beings. The blessed ones are they who have learned to turn to Mary their mother either for the relief she can obtain for them from God, even miraculously, if need be, or for the comfort that will make the suffering easy to bear.

3

She is filled with mercy and readiness to forgive the faults and sins of her child.

The ideal mother is the one who never lets a child feel that she holds a grudge against it or refuses to forgive its most flagrant faults when it is repentant. Even when a good mother is bound to punish a child, the spirit of mercy is evident in the manner of the punishment, and it is made evident that, punishment having been inflicted, forgiveness is readily given.

This is perfectly fulfilled in the one perfect mother who has been given to all the children of men. No one knows better than she that when her children sin, they (in the words of Saint Paul) crucify Christ, her first-born Son, to themselves again. No one knows better than she the endless train of new suffering that the sins of her children introduce into the world.

Yet, her first thought is one of mercy toward the sinner. She wants above all to see the sinner forgiven and brought back to the friendship of her Son. Indeed, her mother's love was enlisted by her Son for the cause of saving souls because He Who created that love in her knew that for many it would be the last barrier to despair. He knew that many a sinner, just before giving up forever with the words, "I'm lost," would think of her whose endowment of mercy makes her rightly called "the refuge of sinners" "the hope of the hopeless," "the help of the abandoned." In praying to her, He knew they would be led by her back to Him.

4

She is a tower of patience in the midst of the annoyances and discomforts caused by her children.

A child is born into the world with an inheritance of original sin and, even after baptism, with strong tendencies toward selfishness and actual sin. These tendencies cannot be brought under the control of reason and faith and free will and grace in a day or a month or a year.

The long process of emergence both from the physical weakness of infancy and the tendencies toward selfishness and sin that appear early in the development of a child, subject its mother to innumerable unpleasant tasks and nerve-jangling annoyances and discomforts. The excessive noise made by children, the purposeless quarrelling to which they tend, their carelessness in regard to neatness and order, these and many other selfish tendencies are certainly tests of a mother's patience and fortitude.

The good mother strives to make herself a tower of patience in the midst of annoyances caused by her growing children. She knows that to act like a child herself, to give vent to impatience, to succumb to nagging, to manifest self-pity, to be like an ogre, will retard the development of self-control in her children. Day by day she tries to instill in each child a little more thoughtfulness, patience, and self-discipline. She knows that her patience will be rewarded when, years later, she will be able to look upon them as well-formed Christian personalities and good men and women.

The perfect mother is Mary, who tolerates with patience so much imperfection in her children. She is aware that her Son offers to all sufficient, even abundant graces, to make them saints. But how few become saints! How many, with their adult selfishness and habitual venial sins, must be to her and her Son as difficult as quarrelling and noisy children are to their mothers. Yet Mary still answers the prayers of her difficult children; she still dispenses graces to them; she still looks forward to seeing them with her in heaven.

5

She is a model for their imitation in all that is good.

Whether she likes it or not, every mother is a model for her children. She is a model for good or for bad. A child is dependent on its mother not only for the physical things it needs, but also for its first and most powerful ideas of what is the right and best way to live, of what kind of human being it should be. These first ideas come, not from teaching, but from the actual conduct, the example of its mother.

A good mother, knowing the power of what she is and what she does to shape her child's ideas of what it should become, wants to make herself an image that will always lead her child toward good and away from bad. Faith in God, love of God, hope of heaven, love of neighbor, patience in adversity, calmness in turmoil, self-sacrifice for others, honesty, truthfulness, moderation—these and many other ideals first influence the mind and character of a child as they are seen in its mother.

The perfect mother is Mary. In her, God's grace reached its perfect fulfillment in a life that was marked by every virtue. As a result, those who think often about Mary and hold an image of her enshrined in their hearts are inspired thereby to want to be like her and to grow in virtue as they advance in years.

6

She is a teacher of her children with the special effectiveness that only love can add to the art and science of teaching.

It is God's eternal plan that the first teacher of every child should be its mother. She is the one who has hovered over the child during its infancy, when its mind was as yet incapable of grasping ideas, instructions, and precepts. She is the one who sees the first awakening of a child's mind, who hears its first questions, and who becomes first aware of its thirst for knowledge. In the first days and weeks of consciousness and reason awakening in her child, whatever she teaches her child comes to the child surrounded by an aura of the greatest love that God has created in the world. For that reason, those teachings will be loved and will be remembered.

Thus, the teaching task of a mother begins long before it is time for her child to go to school. The child is ready for its first simple ideas about God, about Jesus, about Mary, about sin and virtue, about heaven and hell, and about prayer, long before it can be accepted in any school. These ideas must come from the mother, made beautiful and appealing by all the artistry of her love.

Mary is the perfect teacher of all her children. Relatively few sentences that fell from her lips are actually recorded in the Bible. However, every one of them contains eternal wisdom and can be the starting point of meditation that will lead a soul to surrender, like Mary, completely to God. "Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to Thy word...." "My soul doth magnify the Lord, whatever He shall command, that do ye." From these and other words of Mary, uttered with inexpressible love for all mankind, her children are taught the very essence of true religion and Christian character.

7

She is a victim for her child through sacrifice.

The only perfect and complete test of love is sacrifice. Whenever God creates or awakens love on earth, He provides opportunities for that love to manifest itself by sacrifice. Whenever those who love weary of sacrifice or renounce it, their love diminishes and ultimately dies.

In a "pleasure-and-comfort-loving age" there can be no doubt that the failure of many mothers and the delinquency of many children are due in large measure to lack of sacrifice on the part of the former.

There are many sacrifices that a woman cannot avoid in becoming a mother. There is sacrifice of her comfort and appearance and freedom to do what she pleases during the months when she is carrying a child in her womb. There are all the sacrifices involved in bringing forth her baby. There are inescapable sacrifices connected with the most elementary care of a child after it is born.

A mother can draw the line in making sacrifices for her child that will leave it unconvinced of her love and deprive it of many things that it needs. As soon as possible after its birth, she can go back to what she calls a "career," and leave the care of the child to others. She can rebel against sacrificing time-consuming pleasures and amusements for the sake of her child. She may have money enough to hire others to do the things that a mother should do herself but a mother does those things best.

The good mother may at times feel that the burden of sacrifice required of her is a heavy one. She may even feel a nudge of self-pity now and then. But she quickly overcomes her feelings with the realization that her sacrifices are her love in action and are accepted by God as tremendous sources of grace for her children.

The perfect mother, from the viewpoint of sacrifice for her children, was Mary. She accepted a stable as the birth-place for her Child. She uncomplainingly took the role of an exile in Egypt when a jealous king sought to murder her Child. She saw Him grow up to be hated and hunted by the men He loved. She stood beneath His cross and watched Him die. No word of complaint ever escaped her lips. She knew that her sacrifices would be fruitful for the salvation of her children.

8

She is an unselfish giver of her child back to God.

A good mother knows that, after she has borne the sacrifices involved in bearing and rearing each child that God sends her, He will ask her to give up each one to a calling of its own. Her love is prepared for this; it does not selfishly try to cling forever to the companionship of the child who has grown into a man or a woman. She knows that God's designs must take precedence over her own desires.

God's will may manifest itself as calling a son or daughter to the priestly or religious life. Or it may make marriage appear to be their obvious vocation. A good mother never stands in the way of her child's fulfilling its own destiny in life. She never places selfish obstacles in the way of its doing what God wants it to do. She knows that God chose her to prepare her children for lives and callings of their own. She knows that they are God's children before they are hers; and she willingly gives them back to God when He asks for them.

The perfect model of this feature of motherhood is Mary. Her Son's vocation was to die on a cross for the redemption of all mankind and to die in the full glory of young manhood. When the time came, she gave Him to His cross and, on the cross, to all the world. Thus, she became the model for every mother who is asked to give a son or daughter back to God.

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